

**Susan Hauptman:
The Obsessive
Image**

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Susan Hauptman: The Obsessive Image
February 3 - March 26, 1990

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art
17th Street and New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Related Event

Curator's Talk
Terrie Sultan
Thursday, March 8, 6:30 p.m.

As part of the Gallery's Art & Co. evening series, Curator of Contemporary Art Terrie Sultan will discuss **Susan Hauptman: The Obsessive Image**. The discussion is followed by a reception. For ticketing information, call the Membership Office at 638-3211, extension 505.

The Love of Looking and the Projection of Desire

Despite first appearances, Susan Hauptman is not a realist. Representation--as opposed to resemblance--is reflexive, and Hauptman's self-portraits do not set out to represent photographic verification, but to disclose her existence through mediation and metaphor. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, Hauptman is fascinated with a looking-glass world of reflected perceptions that is full of reversal and contradiction. Her art exploits the dual roles of the model and its double, empowering images as agents that represent herself to the viewer. Hauptman's use of mirrors as vehicles for introspection rather than as windows to nature seizes on reflection to evoke a private activity of discovery and revelation. Just as Alice's story can be read in terms of sexual enlightenment, we can similarly regard Hauptman's work as visual documentation of her artistic identity as a sensual and sexual being.

The obsessive character of Hauptman's self-portraits takes on the nature of an analysis of herself as an empowering recreation, a personification of *Ecce Homo*. She distorts and reshapes her body, surrounding herself with personal symbols that create a mythic persona while providing clues to her identity. The conundrum of the artist's limited means of transubstantiating herself for her audience is reinforced through drawing utensils in *Self Portrait*, 1982. Nude to the waist with a pencil in her right hand, Hauptman assumes a pose marked by tape cues on the floor; the fabrics in the picture are lovingly rendered, while her face is imprecise and blurred; arms are extended in a gesture of supplication, and musculature and bone structure are enlarged to suggest masculine physiognomy. Her directed gaze is alternately a confrontation and an entreaty--a dare to the viewer to suspend disbelief and view her naked vulnerability. In contrast, in *Self Portrait*, 1983, the artist employs a seated gesture that suggests confidence and control. In this acutely self-aware portrait, Hauptman's face is depicted in minute detail and she is again holding drawing utensils. However, the tools point inward, not in a gesture of entreaty or pleading but in a suggestion of confidence, inner divinity, power, or even hubris. Neither the background nor the plain fabric of the artist's skirt afford any extraneous detail or distracting pattern to divert the viewer from the artist's essential presentation of her persona.



Self Portrait, 1983

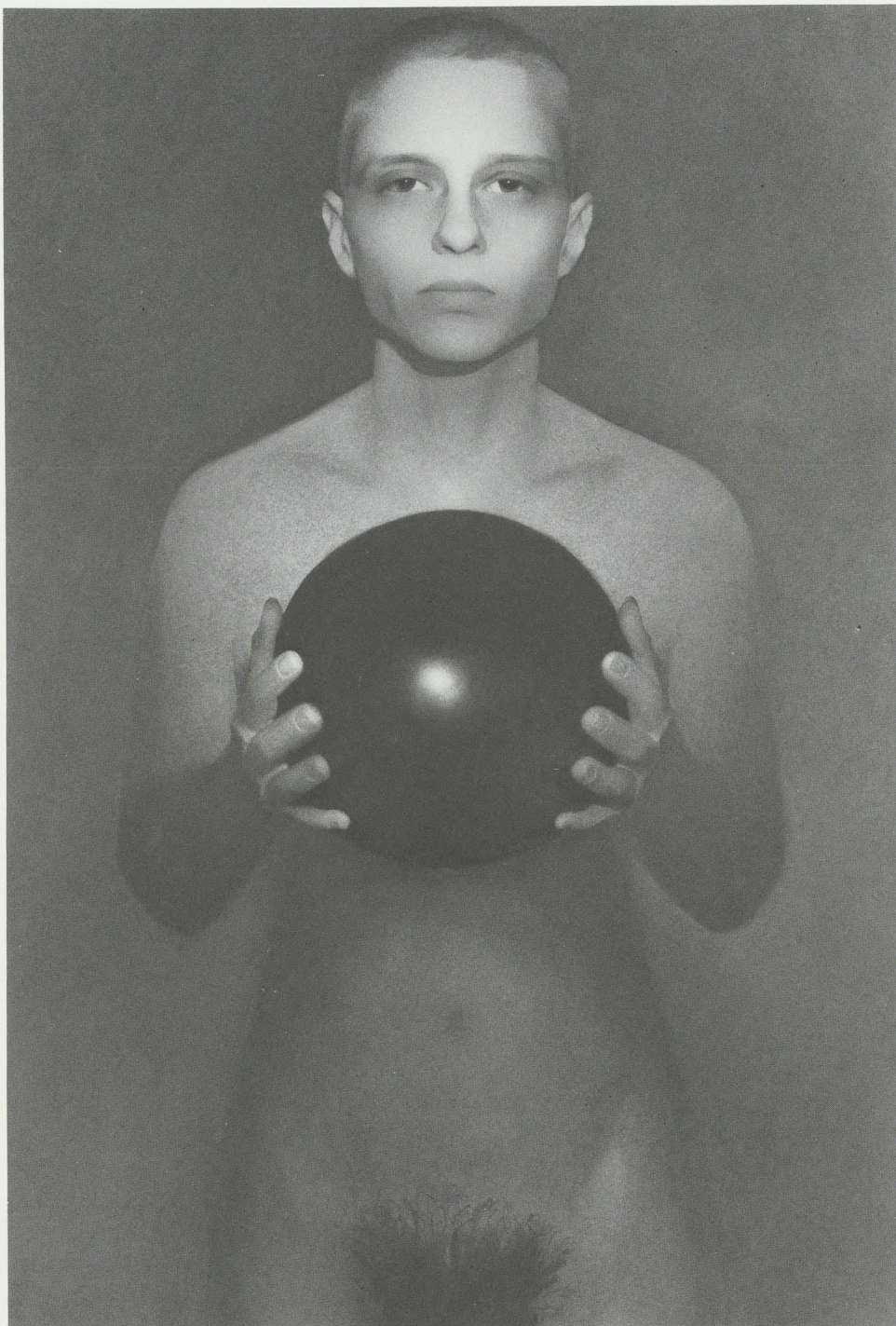
Juxtaposed between table and curtain backdrop, Hauptman is positioned in front of one of her still life set-ups in *Self Portrait*, 1984. In this pose the artist grasps charcoal and pastels like tools, eating utensils or weapons. Placing her body in the protective posture of profile, she regards the viewer warily, as if caught in the act of creation. Again, her dress is rendered flatly, and throughout this drawing Hauptman's technique robs this depiction of any complexity or depth except as a stagy set-up. *Self Portrait*, 1986 is Hauptman's most specifically autobiographical portrait. Presenting a bowling ball like a votive offering, she alludes to a key element of past confrontations in her personal relationship. While obfuscating the intimate details of her narrative, Hauptman describes herself completely vulnerable in her nakedness; the awkward shield of the ball symbolizes a state of crisis, pointedly concealing her sexuality while revealing her naked state. The overt similarities between this pose and the iconography of the sacrificial postures in sixteenth and seventeenth-century

Spanish pictures of Catholic martyrs is romantically internalized within this pose, but Hauptman is not a martyr. She retains an essentially sardonic sense of patient humor willingly incorporating the mundane details of her domestic dispute in this most disturbing representation as a compelling symbol of her individuality.



Self Portrait, 1984

Self Portrait, 1988 and *Self Portrait*, 1989 break with past formulations, and are in some ways the most nihilistic of her self-representations. Rather than using a full-body portrait format, Hauptman focuses almost exclusively on her face and head, dispensing with costumes and props in favor of straightforward clothing and neutral frontal poses. All allusions to her life as an artist are eliminated in favor of an examination of femininity that hints at a personal or artistic crisis of confidence. Hauptman mockingly reintroduces theatricality in *Self Portrait*, 1989. Dressed in a boy's argyle sweater, she wears a bow on top of her head;



Self Portrait, 1986

such incongruous combinations, while in keeping with the skeptical examination of doubts raised in her earlier works, mark a return to allusions to the masculine, creative side of her persona, and reintroduce the artist's humorous sense of the absurd.



Self Portrait, 1989

The Formula of Magic

Hauptman confounds illusive images with allusion, creating formal arrangements that deceive us into believing that finely rendered images can be representations. She resolves the boundaries between abstraction and representation by gaining fetishistic control over her materials and by obsessively conceptualizing the formal aspects of her composition. Confronting abstraction in the late 1960s, she abandoned self-portraiture to accomplish a series of pen-and-ink line drawings that broke completely with representation. "Abstractions gave me the freedom of doing whatever I wanted--lying, cheating--anything I wanted with the space. The space is where my loyalty lies, not in objects."¹ Hauptman worked abstractly for ten years, after which she "learned what I had set out to, which was to look at a blank piece of paper and feel the space in terms of shapes and forms, and not in terms of what [images] you are looking at." Her intense concentration and involvement in problem-solving continued as she reintroduced imagery and returned to charcoal and pastel in a series of drapery studies and still lifes.

1 All quotes by the artists are from an interview conducted in June, 1989.



Still Life, 1985

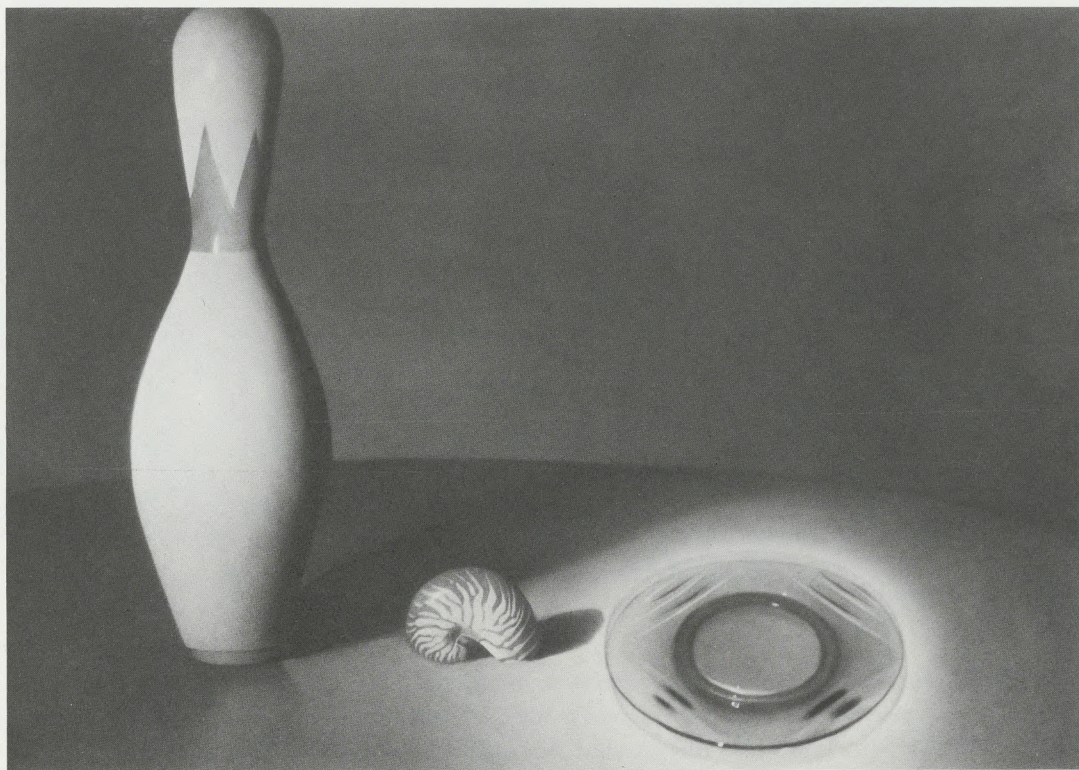
Hauptman fetishizes drawing by obsessively manipulating, rubbing, smearing and rearranging a host of minute details until an arbitrary degree of luminosity and compositional interplay are resolved. Her materials—charcoal, graphite, and pastel—lend themselves to constant reworking, as do the various compositional elements she employs repeatedly in her drawings. The intersection of meaning and method becomes the point of completion for her drawings, and is signified in her work by these formal devices. "I think artists dream of reaching a level where magical things happen with their work that they just can't set out to do. It isn't just labor, it becomes magic." Although she is not above using mechanical devices, such as projection of fabric patterns, to resolve technical problems, it is finally her perception of the corporeality of the drawing expressed through the successful melding of content and process that is at issue. "Technical problems in a drawing suggest content problems. They hint at the real problem, which is that there is no inherent essence to a drawing."

Formal devices can also be pivotal to projecting the content of her work. The deception underlying the self-portraits hinges on Hauptman's use of the mirror; her willingness to withhold or share information suggests how we are expected to perceive her image. This is most apparent in *Self Portrait, 1982*, where a tape cue on the floor that the artist uses to resume her position signifies one of two possibilities to those who know how to read the picture. This clue, which appears in only one other drawing, implies a direct degree of representation;

Hauptman's strategy forces us to evaluate the image in one of two distinct ways--as either a direct representation, or as a mirror-image. Are we seeing the artist or her double? Seduced by the convincing representations in Hauptman's drawing, we accept her gambit: by acknowledging this clue, we are forced to recognize the powerful artificiality of our perceptions.

Still Life: Oblique Narratives

Created simultaneously with the self-portraits, Hauptman's still lifes use less confrontational tactics to expand the dimensions of her theater of emotion. Including objects in oblique combinations, she gives herself the freedom to liberally fragment and restructure reality in mysterious ways that she cannot convincingly accomplish in depictions of herself. While the self-portraits can be seen as documenting particular events or even outré erotic fantasies, Hauptman's still lifes offer a means of mitigating the often mundane details of subjective reality through the poetry of allusions created with meticulously exacting precision. In these compositions, relationships and situations are left purposefully ambiguous or unexplained, inferring a double world in which personalized mythological subtexts are often more important than what is described; it is the viewer's responsibility to decode the artist's symbolic structures. Objects assume the role of surrogates with the quality of characters whose compelling surfaces have been invested with aspects of personality. These forms reappear in different circumstances as members of a theatrical group



Still Life, 1986

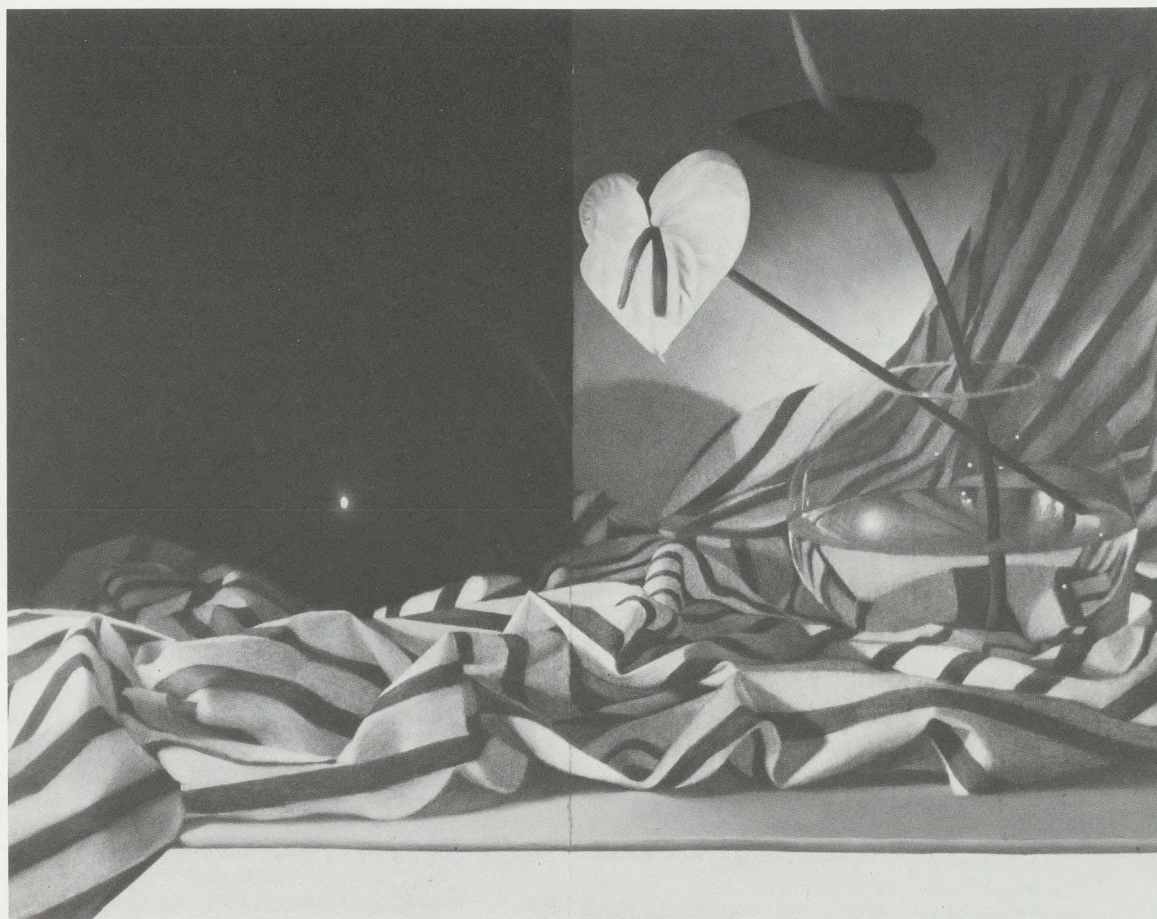
consigned to present a new and different play in each still life. Repeated from drawing to drawing, they become a vocabulary with which Hauptman constructs an internal discourse on a reflective and often contradictory world of opposites that are phrased in terms that encompass masculine and feminine, black and white, decoration and substance, subjective sensualist and objective artist. In addition to proffering seductive accoutrements under the guise of set dressing, they gain additional meaning from Hauptman's awareness and careful manipulation of their importance for precisionist, constructivist, and surrealist artists. This linkage is nowhere more clearly embodied than in the mid-1920s photographs of Paul Outerbridge. Like Outerbridge, whose polished still life compositions she sometimes emulates, Hauptman envisions still life as a means of examining the subtle terrain of the human spirit by constructing a metaphorical, largely autobiographical identity that is cumulatively embodied in the repeated use of groupings of seemingly unrelated, often commonplace objects.

In *Still Life*, 1981, Hauptman juxtaposes non-reality and displacement using compositional tactics that are staples in the formal vocabulary of Outerbridge. Beach ball, nautilus shell, and spiral-shaped candleholder, multiplied as geometric forms by multiple shadows cast from dramatic lighting, are united in the service of the odd science of alchemy--except that Hauptman's alchemy is organic, not chemical--she longs to transform sense into symbol, not base metal into gold. In this drawing Hauptman introduced the beach ball as an object that plays a role; in several other still lifes and self-portraits it also functions as a sexual indicator, and in many ways is a precursor to the bowling ball that becomes an overtly symbolic image in *Self Portrait*, 1986. The interior landscape of *Still Life*, 1985 is a set-up based on intellectual and sexual gamesmanship. The checkered cloth and horse-shaped bookend make reference to the game of chess, a traditionally male endeavor for which the prototypic modernist Marcel Duchamp abandoned art. Cloaked in shadowy space, the objects of this composition are combined to suggest a menacing dream state, the shoe--an implement of utility as well as a sign-bearer of feminine sensuality--tapers into an abstracted, weapon-like point. *Still Life*, 1986 is a study in the nuances of revelation and concealment. The plate, set apart from the other monochromatic elements in the drawing by its subtle but radiant green hue, bears designs that call to mind the symbols inscribed on the coins of the Chinese divination rite of the I-Ching, wherein the questioner seeks answers about life and love through the use of an interlocutor. None of the objects overlap in this odd grouping; all are placed side by side in a row, standing as highly personalized symbols of masculinity and femininity.

In *Still Life*, 1988 Hauptman parallels the recurrent image of the bowling ball with a round flower vase. This mirror-imaging (a concept implied but never overtly stated in the self-portraits), is augmented through a concisely plotted series of opposites, reflections, and contradictions that are formally sustained by



Paul Outerbridge, Jr.
Toy Display (Circus), nd, silver print, Museum purchase with funds from the Polaroid Corporation



Still Life, 1988

a diptych composition. This symbolism is explicitly repeated by two flowers that further describe and symbolize aspects of masculine and feminine sexuality. In many ways this drawing expresses a culmination of Hauptman's struggle to reconcile spiritual meaning within the limited dimension of physical opposites. This conflict is inherent in all of Hauptman's drawings, but is most evident in the self-portraits, as she inverts the misogynistic surrealist canon of woman as muse by openly representing herself as a creator who is equal parts feminine and masculine. Portraying her feminine or sensual persona through theatricality and her masculine or artistic component through distortion and metaphor, Hauptman creates iconic representation of her own being, inviting the viewer to transfer feelings of possession and fetishism to her pictured image until he or she consciously chooses to break away.²

Terrie Sultan

Curator of Contemporary Art

2. For an extended discussion of the subject of fetishization, see "The Power of Images: Response and Repression," and "Verisimilitude and Resemblance: From Sacred Mountain to Waxworks" in David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, University of Chicago Press, 1989

Susan Hauptman was born in Detroit, Michigan. She received degrees from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan (BFA) and Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan (MFA). She lives and works in Venice, California.

One person exhibitions:

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1972 | University of Pittsburgh,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania |
| 1974 | St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York |
| 1976 | Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York |
| 1984 | Jeremy Stone Gallery, San Francisco, California
Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, California
Allan Stone Gallery, New York, New York |
| 1988 | Allan Stone Gallery, New York, New York |
| 1989 | Jeremy Stone Gallery, San Francisco, California |
| 1990 | The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. |

Group exhibitions:

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1971 | "Drawing U.S.A.," Minnesota Museum of Art,
St. Paul, Minnesota |
| 1972 | "59th Exhibition of Michigan Artists,"
Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit,
"8th Pennsylvania Invitational," Westmoreland
County Museum of Art, Greensburg,
Pennsylvania
"8th Dulin National," Dulin Gallery, Knoxville,
Tennessee |
| 1973 | "Western Pennsylvania Women's Art,"
Chatham College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
"3rd Michigan Artists Invitational," Kresge Art
Center, Michigan State University, Lansing,
Michigan
"Drawing U.S.A.," Minnesota Museum of Art,
St. Paul, Minnesota
"National Drawing Exhibition,"
State University of Potsdam, Potsdam,
New York
"Images on Paper," Springfield Art Association,
Springfield, Illinois
"3rd National Drawing Exhibition,"
Minot State College, Minot, North Dakota
"19th Drawing and Sculpture Exhibit,"
Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana |

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 1974 | "National Drawing Exhibition,"
Henderson Museum, University of Colorado,
Boulder, Colorado
"National Drawing Exhibition,"
Watson Gallery of Art, Wheaton College,
Norton, Massachusetts
"Images on Paper," Springfield Art Association,
Springfield, Illinois
"16th National Drawing Exhibition,"
Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma
"11th National Drawing Exhibition," Western
Washington State College, Bellingham,
Washington |
| 1975 | "Drawing USA," Minnesota Museum of Art,
St. Paul, Minnesota
"National Drawing Exhibition,"
State University at Potsdam, Potsdam, New York
"International British Drawing Biennale,"
Middlesbrough, Cleveland, England
"Abstraction Alive and Well," State University at
Potsdam, Potsdam, New York
"18th National Drawing Exhibition," University of
North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota |
| 1976 | "Drawing Invitational," Smith College Museum of
Art, Smith College,
Northampton, Massachusetts |
| 1982 | "New Talent," Allan Stone Gallery, New York,
New York |
| 1983 | "Great Big Drawings," Roger Ramsay Gallery,
Chicago, Illinois |
| 1984 | "On Paper," Jeremy Stone Gallery,
San Francisco, California
"line/gesture/dimension: Drawings by 5 Bay Area
Artists," San Francisco Arts Commission
Gallery, San Francisco, California |
| 1985 | "Realist Drawing and Watercolor,"
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,
San Francisco, California
"Donna Cehrs, Guy Diehl, Stan Goldstein,
Susan Hauptman," Jeremy Stone Gallery,
San Francisco, California |
| 1985/87 | "The Janss Collection of 20th Century
American Realism,"
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,
San Francisco, California, and traveling to:
the DeCordova and Dana Museum and Park,
Lincoln, Massachusetts;
Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery,
University of Texas at Austin,
Austin, Texas; Mary and Leigh Block Gallery,
Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois;
Williams College Museum of Art,
Williamstown, Massachusetts;
Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio;
Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin |

- 1986 "Best Picks," Oakland Museum, Oakland, California
 "Contemporary Bay Area Art: A Jewish Perspective," The Jewish Community Museum, San Francisco, California
 "Recent Drawings from Northern California," Memorial Union Art Gallery and C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California, Davis, California
 "M. Lee Fatherree, Photographs of Artists," Bank of America World Headquarters, Concourse Gallery, San Francisco, California
 "Dealer's Choice," San Francisco International Airport, San Francisco, California
- 1987 "Gallery Artists," Jeremy Stone Gallery, San Francisco, California
 Allan Stone Gallery, New York, New York
 "Bay Area Drawing," Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California
 "Present Perspectives: 1975-1985; PASSAGES: A Survey of California Women Artists, 1945 to Present," Fresno Art Center & Museum, Fresno, California
- 1987/88 "The Artists of California: A Group Portrait in Mixed Media," The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California and traveling to: Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California; Laguna Art Museum, Laguna, California
- 1988 "Work by Newly Elected Members and Recipients of Honors and Awards," The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, New York

Awards and Grants:

- 1976 Faculty Research Grant, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 1976 Guest Artist, Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York
 Faculty Research Grant, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York
- 1978 Faculty Residence, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York
- 1984 Artist of the Year, Oakland Museum, Oakland, California
- 1985 Artist Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
 US/France Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
- 1988 The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, New York

Bibliography

- Victoria Dalkey, "Drawing on the Basics," *Sacramento Bee*, April 27, 1986
- Cecily Barth Firestein, "Dreams Within Dreams," *ARTSPEAK*, January 16, 1988
- Christopher French, "Spaces for Obscure Magic," *Artweek*, June 2, 1984
- Blake Green, "'Best Picks' Showcases Four Bay Area Artists," *The Museum of California*, November
- J. Burstein Hays, "Drawing Broadly Defined," *Artweek*, October 13, 1984
- Jamake Highwater, "Artists Who Work All Night Long," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 14, 1988
- Harvey L. Jones, *The Artists of California: A Group Portrait in Mixed Media*, (exh. cat., The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California, 1988)
- Jim Jordan, "Mid-Career Miscellany," *Express*, December 19, 1986
- , "Drawn to Richmond," *Express*, July 10, 1987
- Claude LeSuer, "Visual Olympics to Demolition Derby," *ARTSPEAK*, February 16, 1984
- Al Morch, "Drawing Close to Reality," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 21, 1984
- Christina Orr-Cahall, *Best Picks*, (exh. cat., The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California, 1986)
- Pierre Picot, "Confronting Self and Others," *Artweek*, March 18, 1989
- Kate Regan, "Drawings of Startling Realism," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 19, 1984
- Charles Shere, "Richmond's B.A.D. Show is G-O-O-D," *Oakland Tribune*, July 7, 1987
- Robert Tomlinson, *First Sight: Bay Area Drawing*, (exh. cat., Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California, 1987)
- Cheryl White, "Quality as a Common Denominator," *Artweek*, November 15, 1986

Photo credits:

- M. Lee Fatherree: *Self Portrait*, 1983; *Self Portrait*, 1984; *Self Portrait*, 1986; *Still Life*, 1985; *Still Life*, 1986
- William Nettles: *Still Life*, 1988; *Self Portrait*, 1989

Checklist

Height precedes width
All dimensions include frames

Still Life, 1981
(shell, beach ball, spiral)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
37 x 37 inches
Collection of Mrs. Glenn C. Janss

Self Portrait, 1982
(standing)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
64 x 40 inches
Private collection, courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery,
New York, New York

Self Portrait, 1983
(seated with pencils)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
61 3/4 x 39 inches
Private collection

Birthdoy Cake, 1983
Charcoal
20 x 20 1/4 inches
Private collection, courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery,
New York, New York

Still Life (BBB), 1983
(party hat and bowling pin)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
53 x 38 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery,
New York, New York

Self Portrait, 1984
(evening dress)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
68 1/2 x 32 inches
Collection of Charles and Leslie Herman

Self Portrait, 1984
(evening dress with white ruffle)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
71 x 59 inches
Private collection, courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery,
New York, New York

Self Portrait, 1985
(facial close-up)
Charcoal
19 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches
Collection of Robert Harshorn Shimshak

Leonard, 1985
Charcoal
19 x 21 inches
Private collection, courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery,
New York, New York

Still Life, 1985
(black pump)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
31 1/2 x 43 3/4 inches
Private collection, courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery,
New York, New York

Self Portrait, 1986
(bowling ball)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
44 x 32 inches
Collection of the Oakland Museum

Still Life, 1986
(bowling pin, shell, glass plate)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
40 1/4 x 51 inches
Collection of Donald and Linda Novack

Still Life, 1988
(bowling ball and round vase)
52 1/2 x 64 inches
Private collection,
courtesy of the Jeremy Stone Gallery,
San Francisco, California

Self Portrait, 1988
(bandanna)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
41 3/4 x 28 inches
Courtesy of the artist and the Jeremy Stone Gallery,
San Francisco, California

Still Life, 1989
(vase with leaves)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
43 3/4 x 50 1/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and the Jeremy Stone Gallery,
San Francisco, California

Self Portrait, 1989
(bow)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
41 1/2 x 28 inches
Collection the Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C., Gift of the Women's Committee of
Corcoran Gallery of Art

Still Life, 1989
(glass vase and beach ball)
Charcoal and pastel on paper
31 x 29 inches
Private collection,
courtesy of the Jeremy Stone Gallery,
San Francisco, California



